

**Testimony of
Gerald E. Connolly, Chairman
Fairfax County Board of Supervisors**

**Before
The Committee on Government Reform**

“Every Kid Is Worth Fighting For: A Community Partnership”

July 14, 2006

**Room 305
Fairfax City Hall
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Good morning Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee. My name is Gerald E. Connolly and I am the Chairman of the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors. On behalf of myself and the members of the Board of Supervisors, I want to thank you for the opportunity to appear before the committee this morning to speak with you about how Fairfax County is working successfully to protect our most precious resource, our children, from the threat of gangs. Our commitment is that every kid is worth fighting for. Our approach, a true working partnership between County Government, the business community and nonprofit, faith and civic groups, is truly unique and is a testament to a simple idea — that all of us have a role in protecting our children’s future and the safety of our citizens. It was with that simple, but powerful, idea that the Board of Supervisors embarked on this project with the adoption of our Gang Initiative on January 26, 2004.

In my inaugural speech in 2003, I laid out six priorities that I felt were of particular importance for our local government to focus on. Chief among these was the need to tackle the growing threat of gangs.

Education and public safety are the top two priorities of any local government. Over the years Fairfax County has made strategic investments in public safety and I am proud to be able to say that, with more than 1 million residents, Fairfax County is the safest jurisdiction of its size in the country. Those investments are paying off. Last year our crime rate declined by 3.2 percent, dropping to a 32-year low. One of the few clouds on that otherwise bright horizon is the rise of gang activity in the region. Gangs challenge the County’s fundamental mission to keep every neighborhood and community safe and to create a quality of life that allows our children to thrive and reach their full potential. The threat of gangs must be combated and our children prevented from undertaking this destructive and dangerous lifestyle.

There are an estimated 1,500 gang members in Fairfax County. During 2005, police statistics indicate that there were approximately 1,200 gang-related crimes reported within the County. Police estimate that over the last five years they have identified nearly 100 gangs in Fairfax County, most small and short-lived. We estimate that gang members in Fairfax County are responsible for less than 10 percent of violent crimes, such as homicide, rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, larceny and motor vehicle theft, and that virtually all of this violent gang activity is committed by one gang member on another gang member. Approximately 40 percent of gang-related crimes in Fairfax County were for destruction of private property as a result of graffiti. The most active gangs in the County include Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) the county’s largest group, South Side Locos (SSL), CRIPS, BLOODS, Folk Nation, People Nation and 18th Street. The gang problem in Fairfax County is real, but as a result of proactive actions taken by the

Board, our Police force and our community partners, the problem of gangs is not at an epidemic level in Fairfax County as it is in some other comparable jurisdictions throughout the country.

That being said, gangs pose a significant threat to public safety and we take that threat very seriously.

As I have said, the solution to the threat of gangs does not lie only with law enforcement. The coordinated prevention strategy that we undertook two years ago is a cross-agency, communitywide initiative to strengthen and improve collaboration between all County departments, schools, the private sector, faith-based groups and the community at large. Together, we have undertaken an anti-gang effort based on prevention, intervention and suppression strategies.

As Chairman Davis is aware, Fairfax County has long been involved in gang prevention and related activities, including the establishment of the Police Gang Investigative Unit in 1994, and has a well-deserved reputation for providing numerous youth recreation and education opportunities that have deterred the vast majority of our young people from ever joining gangs — an investment that will pay dividends in public safety and quality of life long into the future.

But there were missing elements in the County's efforts when I brought my Gang Initiative to the Board two years ago, including identification and coordination of what we were already doing. Some of the things we had put in place were recognizable as anti-gang programs, such as our Police unit. Those heading other programs, such as after-school care and youth job training, librarians and Park Authority staff did not think of themselves as part of the anti-gang effort. In some places, critical services were falling short of the need, such as after-school programs for middle school students, our highest risk population during the highest risk hours of the day. Most notably, those in charge of these resources had no way of talking to each other, of coordinating their efforts, of leveraging the time and money they were already investing.

It was with that in mind that, on July 12, 2004, I brought before the Board of Supervisors, an anti-gang initiative and asked that we launch the effort with a Gang Summit. The Summit convened on February 25, 2005, and brought together all sectors of the community to learn, brainstorm and, ultimately, to formulate a plan to combat the influence of gangs on our children and our community.

As a result, the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors directed the County Executive to develop and present a proposal for a cross-agency effort to enhance the coordination of activities regarding gangs and to involve the Fairfax County Public School system as well as community-based organizations, including the Fairfax Partnership for Youth. The Board of Supervisors also directed the inclusion of a community coalition connected to high schools and their feeder schools, as well as representatives from regional shopping malls or centers.

The Board of Supervisors also established the Fairfax County Coordinating Council on Gang Prevention, chaired by the County Executive and led by a steering committee. This measure also funded the creation of a Gang Prevention Coordinator position.

The membership of the Coordinating Council is based on the premise that gang prevention, intervention and suppression must be a public, private and community-based effort. The Council is responsible for coordinating the County's preventive and community education efforts and reports to the Board of Supervisors. The Council also seeks to educate and engage members of the community, including parents and other community leaders associated with youth, to work together to help prevent and eliminate gangs in the community. The Council is pursuing five strategies, which are taken from the U.S. Department of Justice Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Comprehensive Gang Model: Community Mobilization; Opportunities Provision; Social Intervention; Suppression; and Organizational Change and Development.

One of the presentations we heard at the Summit was from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, whose gang prevention model is based on the concept that for gang prevention and gang violence reduction efforts to be successful, a three-pronged approach must be implemented. This three-pronged approach — one that Fairfax County has practiced for many years — includes suppression, prevention and intervention strategies. That is Fairfax County's model as well.

In the interest of time and out of respect for my fellow presenters, I would like to outline just a few of our successes in the areas of suppression, prevention and intervention.

Suppression:

The Fairfax County Police Department continues to take a proactive approach to gang suppression and prevention. The department has conducted seven coordinated gang operations in the past 12 months. These operations bring together police resources from the involved district station, the Gang Investigations Unit, Operations Support Bureau, and outside agencies such as Juvenile and Adult Probation and Parole, Fairfax County Public Schools and the County Gang Prevention Coordinator with the goal of targeted suppression of gang activity in a specified area. The Police Department's Youth Services Division, in the summer of 2005, assisted in providing information to the Virginia State Legislature which made the brandishing of a machete a criminal offense. Over the past four years there has been a 100 percent success rate in identifying the suspects in gang related-homicides in Fairfax County. The homicide rate remains very low and one of the two most recent cases is being prosecuted utilizing federal RICO statutes. We have seen a reduction across the board in reported violent gang-related crime in the first quarter of 2006 as compared to the first quarter of 2005. The Police Department, in cooperation with other County agencies, has expanded the summer ROAD DAWG (Don't Associate With Gangs) camp to three weeks and anticipates reaching 150 at-risk youth in three regionally run programs. The Police Department continues to train and update officers on gang activity and foster and improve internal communications to more effectively address gang activity.

Additionally the Fairfax County Police and the Fairfax County Gang Prevention Coordinator participate in the Northern Virginia Regional Gang Task Force. In 2003, funding from the United States Congress, through Congressman Frank Wolf, who has been a leading advocate and strong voice in the area of gang prevention, enabled the creation of the Northern Virginia Regional Gang Task Force. This unit bridges the efforts of our gang investigations unit with partners from the metro region including representatives from the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), the Bureau of Alcohol Tobacco and Firearms (ATF), and United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement (US-ICE). The result is a coordinated law enforcement and public information effort to combat gang activity. In regard to the intervention and prevention component of the Task Force I will invite Bob Bermingham to speak further on that issue.

Prevention:

- Middle School After-School Programs — The Board of Supervisors earmarked \$3.5 million to expand after-school programs in all 26 county middle schools. This investment builds on an ongoing effort in Fairfax County to provide high-quality after-school activities for middle school youth through the collaborative efforts of the School Board, the Board of Supervisors, Department of Community and Recreation Services, school community coalitions and the Fairfax Partnership for Youth.
- Healthy Choices — During the 2005-2006 academic year, the Fairfax County Police in collaboration with the Fairfax County Public Schools implemented Healthy Choices, a gang prevention curriculum, which was provided all Fairfax County Public School middle school students, as part of the health and physical education curriculum. As a result of the implementation of this program, 26,115 middle school students have been exposed to gang prevention information.
- Youth Workers — Last summer, the Department of Community and Recreation Services hired five high school students as Youth Workers. The positions were created by the Board of Supervisors and the Coordinating Council on Gang Prevention to get the youth perspective on county gang prevention-related programs and services. At the end of the summer, the Youth Workers made recommendations for community and recreation facilities, programs and services; developed a marketing plan to get youth involved in the centers; and created a gang prevention program. In 2006 the Youth Workers program has been expanded and now includes 10 Youth Workers.
- Boys and Girls Club of America Collaboration — Fairfax County staff has been working closely with the Boys and Girls Club of Greater Washington and Cox Communications to expand club locations in Fairfax County. In October a new Boys and Girls Club opened in Hutchinson Elementary School in Herndon and serves approximately 30 children. It joins the club that is located in the Culmore area near Baileys Crossroads. A third club opened this summer at the new Hoop

Magic Sports Academy owned by a Boys and Girls Club Board member and Chief Operating Officer for the Washington Mystics, Curtis Symonds. The Fairfax County Department of Community and Recreation Services in partnership with the Boys and Girls Clubs has a summer camp there. A site selection committee — made up of county service providers, community organizations, Cox Communications staff and representatives of Boys and Girls Clubs — has been actively working to identify potential sites along the Route 1 corridor, which includes the Lorton area. The shared goal is to have six Boys and Girls Club sites operating in Fairfax County by next year.

- PSAs With Cox Communications — In partnership with Cox Communications, \$2 million-worth of gang prevention and gang awareness public service announcements are routinely aired on Cox Communications station affiliates.

Intervention:

- Education of Frontline Staff and Community Stakeholders — During the past 16 months, members of the Fairfax County Gang Prevention Resource Team have conducted more than 250 presentations or trainings on gangs and gang prevention strategies. The majority of the training has been targeted to the “first responders” to gangs and gang activity, such as police, school counselors, juvenile court staff, social services staff and concerned community organizations.
- A Multi-Disciplinary Team — Fairfax County currently has multi-disciplinary teams composed of human service representatives who meet regularly throughout the different regions of the county to collectively provide case planning assistance to community members who have issues needing social service assistance. The multi-disciplinary team approach provides an opportunity for service professionals to meet with gang members and their families for the purpose of linking youth who are involved with gangs and their families to appropriate services.
- Fairfax County Consolidated Community Funding Pool — The CCFP funds projects that provide for human services, affordable housing development administration and construction and acquisition and/or rehabilitation of affordable housing Fairfax County. On May 1, 2006, the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors approved \$10,366,335 for fiscal Year 2007 Consolidated Community Funding Pool awards. The awards supported 115 human service projects operated by 71 nonprofit organizations. Eight of the approved projects were specific to gang prevention and intervention, while dozens of other projects addressed youth and family risk factors for gang involvement.
- CSB Resiliency and Leadership Program and Student Assistance Programs — The Leadership and Resiliency Program and the Student Assistance Program are nationally recognized year-round prevention and intervention programs offered in collaboration with the Fairfax County Public Schools and the Fairfax-Falls

Church Community Services Board. Youth who have participated in these programs have demonstrated improved grade-point averages, decreased absenteeism, decreased suspensions from school, decreased use of alcohol or drugs and reduced community problems such as criminal activity. The programs will be in 15 high schools in the 2006-2007 school year with the remainder of the high schools coming on board in the next school year.

- Fairfax County Skin Deep Tattoo Removal Program – Under the direction of the Fairfax County Health Department and in partnership with INOVA, youth in Fairfax County have the ability to have gang-related tattoos removed free of charge. In order to be eligible, the participant must complete community service hours, be enrolled in school or employed and have no ongoing involvement with criminal activity.

As you can see Mr. Chairman, we have made considerable progress in our efforts in Fairfax County, but there is more to be done and we can use your help. As you know, we have requested \$1.5 million in the FY 2007 federal appropriations process to further strengthen our prevention efforts. This funding will be used for two programs designed to divert youth from gang activity. The first is the Street Outreach Program, which improves the capabilities of organizations that reach at-risk youth and their families by linking them to community and government resources, including the establishment of a gang prevention phone number that would guide kids and their families to available resources within the community. Second, the Evening Reporting Center would provide highly structured supervised activities in a positive and safe environment to minors currently on probation. The goal is to reduce recidivism while allowing youth to continue their education and engage in healthy activities in their communities.

Mr. Chairman and other distinguished committee members, I want to thank you for the invitation to appear before you this morning. I hope that the information I have presented has provided some insight on how Fairfax County is responding to gangs in our community. We have taken on the task of gang prevention head-on knowing that this is no simple task. We are committed to the continued implementation of the OJJDP Gang Prevention Model and its three-pronged approach. We will continue to expand our partnerships within local government and with our stakeholders in the community.

We understand that there are still many challenges ahead of us as we move forward with our gang prevention efforts and that there are no simple answers to the issues of gangs and gang violence. This is a battle we must fight on behalf of our children and their future. Every kid is worth fighting for. Through the implementation of a comprehensive gang prevention and intervention program, which includes a strong suppression component, and by strengthening existing partnerships within local, state and federal government and with the community, we will begin to erase gangs and the violence they bring to the community and keep Fairfax County the safest large jurisdiction in the United States. Thank you.